

Chapter 7: Animals and Infection Control

Pet hygiene

Pets may enhance the experience of pupils in schools. However, some animals including exotic species such as reptiles, fish or birds that are often kept as pets can be a source of human infection. Infections that are passed from animals to humans are known as zoonoses. Some people such as pregnant women, infants, the elderly and people with weak immune systems, AIDS/HIV and those receiving chemotherapy are at greater risk of developing more serious infection. There is no means of knowing which animals may be carrying infection, so one must act at all times on the basis that an animal might be infected. However, sensible precautions, such as effective hand washing, can reduce any risk of infection.

The principal of the school should ensure that a competent person is responsible for any animals brought into the school and that there is no risk of contravening the relevant Health & Safety legislation.

Infection from pets is usually acquired by ingestion of contaminated material e.g. by:

- Eating without washing hands.
- Sucking fingers that have been contaminated.
- Eating food/sweets that have fallen to the ground.

Potential hazards include:

- Touching animals.
- Touching animal/fish foodstuffs.
- Drinking raw(unpasteurised) milk.
- Touching animal faeces.
- Drinking untreated water.

The following principles should underpin the management of pets in any school:

- Only animals in good health should be allowed into a school.
- Iguanas, snakes, turtles and other reptiles may carry specific illnesses and are not appropriate animals to be brought into classrooms for younger children particularly those under five years.
- Pupils must be supervised when handling pets.
- Hands should be washed after contact with animals, their food, bedding or litter.

Farm and zoo visits

Visits to farms and zoos have grown in popularity over recent years; they are considered to be both educational and an enjoyable leisure pastime. Such visits give pupils the chance to have contact with animals they otherwise might not see and also to understand where food comes from.

There are many potential infection hazards (as there are with domestic pets) on open farms, including pet- and animal-farms, and zoos. It is important to remember that diseases affecting animals can sometimes be passed to humans. A number of germs acquired from animals can cause diarrhoea and/or vomiting – which is usually a mild or temporary illness. However, some infections, such as verocytotoxin producing *E. coli* (VTEC) can cause more severe illness, especially in young pupils. There is no means of knowing which animals may be carrying VTEC, so one must act at all times on the basis that an animal might be infected. Only a very small number of germs are needed to cause illness.

Serious outbreaks of infections (e.g. cryptosporidium and VTEC) have been reported amongst pupils following outings to zoos and farm parks.

Infection is mainly acquired by eating contaminated material, sucking fingers that have been contaminated, or by eating without washing hands.

Recommendations to Follow in Relation to Open Farm Visits:

Before the Visit

Before the visit, the organiser should make contact with the farm or zoo being visited to discuss visit arrangements and to ensure that adequate infection control measures are in place. The organiser should be satisfied that the pet farm/zoo is well managed and precautions are in place to reduce the risk of infection to visitors.

The organiser should ensure that hand washing facilities are adequate, accessible to pupils, with running hot and cold water, liquid soap, disposable paper towels, clean towels or air dryers, and waste containers. They should also ensure that all supervisors understand the need to make sure the pupils wash, or are helped to, wash their hands **after** contact with animals.

During the Visit

- Pupils must be supervised at all times.
- Cuts and grazes should be covered with a waterproof plaster.
- Hands should be washed with warm running water and dried thoroughly after contact with animals, animals' feed or bedding, before eating and drinking, after using the toilet, and on leaving the farm. Small children will require supervised hand washing.
- Pupils and staff should not eat or drink anything while touring the farm.
- Pupils and staff should only eat in the designated areas.
- Pupils should not put fingers in their mouths or the mouths of animals.
- Pupils and staff should wear appropriate clothing, including sturdy shoes or Wellingtons but not sandals.
- Visitors should not drink from taps unless specifically labelled as drinking water.
- Visitors should not touch compost, animal waste and after any accidental contact should wash their hands thoroughly.
- Since boots and clothes can become contaminated during the visit it is important to remind pupils to wash their hands after removing their clothes and boots and before doing anything else (e.g. eating). Dirty boots should be cleaned with hot water and detergent. Footwear should be changed or cleaned before leaving and then hands washed.
- Pregnant women should not handle sheep or newborn lambs.

After the Visit

- If a member of the group shows signs of illness (e.g. vomiting and/or diarrhoea) after a farm/zoo visit, they should visit their GP and explain that they have had recent contact with farm animals.
- If two or more members are ill please follow the above action. The school authorities should also contact their local Department of Public Health as further action may be necessary. See Appendix 7 for Departments of Public Health contact details.

Further Information

Further information can be found in the Report of the HPSC Sub-Committee on Verocytotoxigenic *E. Coli*, available on the Health Protection Surveillance Centre's website at <http://www.hpsc.ie/hpsc/A-Z/Gastroenteric/VTEC/Guidance/ReportoftheHPSCSub-CommitteeonVerotoxigenicEcoli/>.

Additional guidance to minimise the risk of VTEC during pet farm visits can be found on the Health Protection Surveillance Centre's website at <http://www.hpsc.ie/hpsc/A-Z/Gastroenteric/VTEC/Guidance/File,3973,en.pdf> and <http://www.hpsc.ie/hpsc/A-Z/Gastroenteric/VTEC/Guidance/File,3976,en.pdf>.